

Interviews With

CHARLES EAGLE PLUME

January 23, 1979

February 19, 1981

Charles Eagle Plume was interviewed on January 23, 1979, at the LaCasa Restaurant, Estes Park. Elaine Hostmark conducted the interview.

On February 19, 1981, Charles Eagle Plume presented a Museum Talk at the Estes Park Municipal Building. Ruth Stauffer was program chairman for the Estes Park Area Historical Museum.

The tape is on file at the Estes Park Public Library and may be checked out. The reader should keep in mind that this is a transcript of the spoken, rather than the written word.

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Interview with Charles Eagle Plume (C)
Date of Interview: January 23, 1979
Interviewer: Elaine Hostmark (EH)

EH Charles, we want to know something about your background and then your life in Estes Park and what you've done here.

C I came to Estes Park as a young man--relatively young. I never knew how old I was because there was no record of my birth. I'd have to guess all the way from ---well today, say somewhere from seventy-five to one hundred five years old. That's a guess. The Associated Press assures me that they found proof that I'm one hundred four, but I don't believe 'em.

I came here because I was part Indian, looking for a job. And I was very poor. When I arrived I had four pennies in my pocket. And a very sweet, little old lady, whose name was Mrs. Church, who ran an ice cream parlor on the main street of Estes Park Village, allowed me to sleep for nothing on the floor at night. Within a few weeks I had become acquainted with the Perkins family. They owned an Indian Trading Post out on Highway 7, about ten miles from town. And I had also become a friend of a delightful and very beloved old man named Granny May. Dear Granny loaned me a horse, and I rode that horse out to the Perkins Trading Post, and Mr. Perkins gave me a job. He couldn't afford to pay me anything, but he said we'll give you free room and board. For a man who then had only two pennies left in his pocket that was a great bonanza. I took the job and never left. For years I worked for no wages.

I earned money on the side by giving programs at night at the various summer lodges with a full-blooded Indian. He beat the drum, and I did the talking. We were successful. We were making more money giving programs than the store was taking in selling Indian curios. In fact, I was rather prosperous. Within three years I had a yellow Ford Model A Roadster with a rumble seat. In those days the town was filled with beautiful young school teachers who came from Kansas and Nebraska and Illinois, and every evening I drove the length of Elkhorn Avenue with the top down and beautiful girls sitting in the rumble seat. I was the envy of every boy in town. And I don't mind saying I wasn't a bad looking young fellow. Something of a rascal, never dreaming I would grow into a dirty old man.

I stayed with the Perkins. He died, and I promised his widow I'd stay with her, help her run the store, chop wood, build the fires, do all the jobs that a dear little old lady couldn't do. During World War II, of course, I was gone. In those years, she brought her shop down and ran it on the main street of town. I came back after the war, she and I re-opened the old Perkins Trading Post which I now call Charley Eagle Plume Store, and in four years she died. But she had left to me, out of gratefulness, I suppose, all the property and all the merchandise in the store, And I have continued to run it and build it up until it is now known as the finest Indian store in America.

EH You told me the little story about antiques. Would you tell us here?

C Mrs. Perkins had always had antiques as well as Indian artifacts, so when I took the store over it was still full of antiques. And I finally got rid of them, not because I didn't like them, but because I was losing my faith in sweet little old ladies. You know, the kind of lady who wears a gray shawl and a cameo pin and does her hair up in a tight bun on the back of her head and is a perfect picture of anybody's mother. I was losing my faith in them. I was discovering that most of them were superb, masterful liars. They would come into my place and tell me, "Charley, this is not really antique, it's a replica, and we'll help you get rid of it. We'll give you a dollar, or two dollars for it." And I, believing them, sold them many rare and valuable things for two dollars.

One day in anger when a dear little lady told me a rare lamp, that I knew was rare and old, was not, I ordered them all out of the shop. I telephoned all of my neighbors, told them to bring over bushel baskets, I was going to give away every antique in the store. And I gave everything away. I kept only the Indian things. I have never been particularly sad that I did because I have also noticed that most males who run antique stores talk something like chickadees.

I was born on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation in northern Montana. My childhood was one of a life of poverty, and I don't understand now how we possibly could have existed. I remember going to school with no shoes, my feet wrapped in gunnysacks in Montana winters, 50 below zero. But I had an ambition, a desire to go farther to schooling, I bought a horse for five dollars and rode that horse all the way from Great Falls, Montana, to Colorado Springs, where by pure luck I got the job of being a male nurse to a Civil War veteran. The man was insane, very feeble and dying, and for four years I went every day to school and spent every night sitting up next to his bedside.

They were reluctant to let me into school because of my very poor educational background on the reservation schools, but it was the first year any school system in America had given IQ tests. I arrived in Colorado Springs a week too late to take them with all the rest of the students, so I had to go over alone to the County Superintendent's office, terrified. I took the test, and to everybody's, including mine, astonishment I came out as a genius...I had the highest IQ of any youngster in town. The entire attitude toward me changed and they promptly put me into a group of geniuses in the high school. Within a week I had filtered down to where I belonged... sub-moron.

Nevertheless, I did get my four years of high school training and meanwhile got the job with the Perkins in Estes Park. And with my dancing programs around hotels I had enough money to go to college. So I went the first year over to Greeley, had a very happy experience, but they could not teach me certain courses I wanted to have, so I transferred to the University of Colorado at Boulder. I got my degree, my Bachelor's degree, at Boulder, continuing to work at the Perkins Indian Trading Post. I then went on to Columbia University in New

C York City in the field of anthropology. Ultimately, I got my doctorate. I became an educated fool. It is too bad that a curious mind was destroyed by being full of too much information. From an older age I am glad to say I am restoring my curiosity in the many things I really didn't know anything about.

The Perkins Indian Trading Post opened up as a tea shop and curio store in 1919 on the old Big Owl Road, before Highway 7 was built. I consider myself as part of the Perkins family because of the way they treated me and because of the love I had with them. So, the shop, I think it can be said, may have been run by one family. All these years from 1919 until this year 1979.

EH That's sixty years.

C Sixty years under one management.

EH But summers only during that time.

C Only in the summer. In the winter I am busy, keeping warm.

EH And you've been busy going all over the country, and perhaps all over the world?

C Yes, I've been out of the country, but principally my lectures have been in the United States. I have talked in every single town in this country that could afford to have me, or would listen to me. So many, many times. I have scrapbooks heaped up from the floor to the ceiling of press clippings. I haven't been bored enough yet to take time to read them, but I will someday I hope, in my old age let us say.

EH What was the gist of your lectures? You can't give a whole one right now, but what was the...

C The gist of the lecture was the important part Indians played in helping develop rural civilization. Their tremendous contributions in the foods, their influence on the founding fathers of the United States of America, their concept of democracy, of equality of all men, of freedom, love of country. New ideas, completely foreign to any being brought over from Europe. So the roots of our American democracy are more than just ancient Greece, or ancient Rome. They come back to ancient American Indian concepts. Certainly our American pioneers were highly influenced by Indian thoughts, by Indian life. That is the whole point of my lecture really. And perhaps something of a plea for better understanding between races. And a little more sympathy for the Indian who has been degraded by his conquerors.

EH Do you think that the attitude is better now than when you started thirty, forty years ago doing this?

C Very much better. When I first started lecturing I found audiences were hostile. The Indian was still regarded as savages, as enemies

- C of civilized society. Now I find people willing to listen, wanting to learn, wanting to accept the moral values of Indian philosophies. I am highly encouraged in all aspects of the young people of today. They are far more mature, far better citizens of the world, than the people or even I were in 1930.
- EH I remember that you used to dance as a part of your act and you had a partner who sang. Right?
- C That's right.
- EH You did some singing, perhaps, but I remember, was it Silver Tongue?
- C Ray Silver Tongue. A remarkable young, full-blooded Santa Ana Pueblo Indian who, to my memory, is unique historically, because he ran from our front door past Charley Hughes' old Hughes-Kirkwood Inn, past the Timberline Cabin at the base of Long's Peak, and up to the top of Long's Peak, and back to our front door, in four hours and twenty-five minutes. Nobody had ever equaled that record.
- EH That is fast. How long were you two together then?
- C We performed together, giving programs around Estes Park, for at least twelve more years. Ray married a very lovely and a very charming white lady. I was a little bit distressed because I thought she married him because he was such a handsome and athletic young man, twenty (?) years her junior. I did not see them for many, many years, but when I did see them again they were still talking baby-talk. This lady had found, at long last, after several marriages, the man she wanted, a real man, and she was in love with him.
- EH That's great. You were only part Indian. Are you...
- C I am one fourth Indian, one half German and one quarter French...a horrible mixture.
- EH And yet you did grow up on a reservation. Your Mother then was only part Indian?
- C My Mother was half Indian, half French. My Father was completely German.
- EH Did he live there on the reservation with you?
- C He lived there. He was the fifth generation of a German family that came over to America. I don't know the date, but it must have been pre-Revolutionary.
- EH Where did you, where do you get your Indian things, and where did you get particularly your museum pieces, your very valuable things?
- C Most of my rare things I have found by chance. In every town I visited on my lecture tours I would spend all my free time hunting through the Salvation Army shops, the second-hand stores and the

- C antique shops. And quite often I would find something Indian. Some of my rarest things, some of the things I am giving to the various museums, I discovered owned by people who didn't know what they were, buying them very cheaply, but I have kept them all, and I am going to give some of them to the Museum of Estes Park, some to the University of Colorado, some to the University over at Greeley, and some to the University up at Ft. Collins.
- EH So they are going to stay in Colorado, mostly?
- C Yes.
- EH What was Estes Park like? What are your memories of it when you first came up here?
- C Estes Park in the early twenties was a very charming mountain town. The sidewalks were wooden, on every corner there was a great big wooden tub for the horses to drink, and on that paved parking lot, on that very spot, was a huge barn, or horse livery. So on the main street all day long there were horseback riders. Every evening around 5:30 all the cows came in from the fields around the town, walked right down main street pushing aside automobiles and chickens. There were blue spruce trees growing around; they're all destroyed now. Most of the shops were log cabins; they were beautiful, charming. The village was what tourists coming from the East were hoping to find in the mountains. We have succeeded in destroying what we had, and we have replaced it with privy copies of their suburban shopping centers. I feel it is a tragedy. I hope someday, somehow, they can return the village to a charming, rustic Colorado mountain town. Then I think our tourists again would be happy.
- EH I am not sure that's possible.
- C No, I don't think so. Mrs. Church was not, I don't believe, an entirely admirable lady, but I loved her. She let me sleep on the floor of her shop when I had no money. I can recall her being the best white Indian squaw in the world. She had an Indian dress which she would put on once every year. In those days we put a parade on once a year in Estes Park, and she would lead the parade with a horse dragging two poles, travois style. One day a tourist rudely backed out of his parking area and broke off her two poles, and Mrs. Church stood in the middle of the street and for half an hour delayed the entire parade as she gave a scolding that a sailor would have been embarrassed to have given. In a loud voice you could hear it from the Elkhorn Lodge clear down to the other end of town. That tourist I am sure thought she was a real Indian. He was terrified, and he left and we never saw him again.
- EH I wonder if he paid for the poles...he couldn't pay for them; he'd have to go out into the woods and get them. Did you know Abner Sprague?
- C Yes, and I loved the old man. He was a true gentleman with a great

C deal of courage, and through the years with his experience with his summer guests, he became quite an educated gentleman. He certainly knew human behavior, understood human character, ran a highly successful lodge, gave not only a good mind but his heart to his business.

EH Did you know Enos Mills?

C Very slightly. I was probably too timid, and Mr. Mills at that time was the big shot up here. I was not ever a deep admirer of him because I admired more his deadly enemy, a gentle little old man named Charley Hughes. Charley Hughes has been laughed at and scoffed at, but he was a pioneer in his own way. He pioneered the ideas that Wilson brought out later in his work with the League of Nations. He influenced something in thousands of people that helped pave the way to the United Nations of today.

EH Charley Hughes was that kind of a thinker, was he?

C Charley Hughes was a lover of mankind and lover of peace. He believed firmly that if everybody would call everyone else "dear" that there would be then world peace. So imagine the scene when a Texas tourist drives up to the door of his inn, walks in and says to Mr. Hughes, "Do you have a room?" and Mr. Hughes says to him, "Yes, dear." Many a Texan promptly left.

EH Did you know Frank Cheley?

C Frank Cheley gave me a job teaching very small boys at his camp Indian lore. I was a failure at the job because I, as a poor quarter breed Indian from the reservation, early learned to do things for myself. I couldn't understand the children of rich people, children who had to be wakened up in the night and taken outdoors to perform natural functions. I would whip them when they would spoil their bed, so Mr. Cheley felt I was not a good counselor in his camp. My job didn't last long, but I learned to admire Mr. Cheley. I think he was not as great a man with youth as he himself thought he was. He wrote a number of books, I haven't read them, I don't think I will.

But I have a little story to tell that may be some of a sidelight of history. During the time I was a counselor at his camp I went to the world famous dance at Stead's Ranch...the cowboy dance they put on every summer. It was regarded in those days as rather risqué affair because there was a moderate degree of drinking, a mixture of the sexes, and some rather wild dancing; and I had the gall to take as my partner, dressed as an Indian, Mrs. Frank Cheley. We made the great mistake of winning first prize. And it appeared on the front pages of the Denver Post: "Mrs. Frank Cheley accompanied by a quarter breed Indian wins first prize, dressed as an Indian at Stead's cowboy dance." I don't know what happened to Mrs. Cheley, but I never had the guts to go back to Cheley Camp.

EH Had he not known that you were going, or that she was going, before time? You mentioned Mrs. March, Minnie March...

C Yes, she operated the old lodge, Fall River Lodge...a charming, rustic old building, destroyed by the efforts of the National Park Administration, to be restored by the National Park to what they considered it must have been like in pre-historic days. They destroyed many charming old inns...the famous old Stead's Ranch... I can't remember the name of the one on Bear Lake Road...

EH Sprague's?

C Yes, Sprague's Ranch. Tore them down. They belonged to the country; they were delightful places for people to stay, but the opinion of the National Park Service was they were discriminating against people who couldn't afford to stay there so they had to go.

EH Did you do mountain climbing around in this area when you were younger?

C Quite a bit. As you know, now I'm afflicted with multiple sclerosis and pretty badly paralyzed. Nobody could dream that at one time I could climb almost every single peak, fifty miles south of Estes Park, fifty miles north of it. Many of them alone, on foot, frequently would cover over twenty-five miles of mountain country in a day, sleep out at night, pioneered I suppose. It never seemed to me that it was professional mountain climbing, and I didn't even call it mountain climbing. We just called it hiking.

Before the road was built up, there was a pass, the road that is now called Trail Ridge. I lived in a dugout partly submerged under the ground, right on the spot where the museum is today...grand old National Park...on top of the pass. I was living there when the first trucks came to haul the dirt, the road scrapers, the workmen. At that time there were as many people a day at the top of Trail Ridge, let's say, possibly twenty. When I go up now and see two thousand there at one time, and when now, all through the day, at least fourteen hours of the day during the summer, there'll be two thousand an hour, I can't believe it. I feel sorry. I wonder what happened to the ptarmigan, to the thousands of ground squirrels and marmots, the deer and the elk, the moose and bear, right next to my little dugout? At that time there was a legend being built up by the National Park Service for the new road, the Trail Ridge Road and the Fall River Road Indian Trail. That legend was completely false. There was no trail up over the top on the spot where they built the road. The old Indian trail was down in Forest Canyon. Indians were smarter than getting up on top where the wind blew hard and where they were exposed to any possible enemy.

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